BUILD THE HOUSE STRONG

May 14, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 6:43-49

"Every one who comes to me and hears my words and does them...is like a man building a house, who dug deep, and laid the foundation upon rock;..."
-Luke 6:47,48 (RSV)

What a day this is! There are, frankly, more things to cheer about this morning than time will allow. And there are more preaching themes floating around than even the most skilled homiletician could weave into one sermon.

It is Pentecost, the day we remember and celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit into the lives of the discouraged disciples of Jesus, their strengthened faith and the immediate beginning of the growth of the Christian movement. It is the birthday of the church. And it is another birthday as well. Seventy-five years ago this week, the week of May 10, 1914, this building was dedicated. Was it only historic coincidence or was it divine providence that just three weeks before the new Fourth Presbyterian Church was dedicated in 1914, another cathedral structure on the North Side of Chicago was consecrated - an institution where thousands of people would be lifted to the heights of joyful bliss, and also stand shoulder to shoulder sharing the dark night of despair; a spacious place for the celebration of eternal verities and common virtue? Wrigley Field opened on April 23, 1914.

It is not an altogether unlikely concurrence. Grantland Rice was only the first of many lovers of the game who see baseball as a metaphor for eternity. Standing on the wonderful, mysterious diamond in "Field of Dreams" a player says, "Is this heaven?" I digress, but I cannot resist.

And Mother's Day, certainly a variation on the birthday motif.

Finally, Confirmation, a very significant occasion for the whole church and particularly for the young people who this day are confirmed and commissioned as disciples of Jesus Christ and members of the church.

The text is a familiar one, made memorable for many of us by the old Sunday School song about the men who built houses upon the rock, and upon

the sand and in the latter case, adorned with all sorts of hand gestures - "the rains came down and the floods came up and the house came crashing down." It's a powerful image, one that has the feel of authenticity to it; people knew its inherent truth. And it came from a man who was a builder, who knew about stresses and weights and pressure and load-bearing. Build the house wisely and strong, he said, or it will not survive the inevitable storms. The story occurs at the conclusion to the major body of ethical teaching in Luke's Gospel. We know it as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. It includes the Beatitudes... "Blessed are the poor... the meek, the peacemakers" and "Love your enemies... Judge not..." The solid foundation for life rests on these words of Jesus.

My suggestion is that the same wisdom is applicable to the building of a church. Make the foundation strong, get the fundamentals right and the church will stand for a very long time. Now what we really must do this morning is recover and recall something of that foundation laying process.

Part of every birthday celebration is remembering and retelling the story. So if you are visiting with us, please indulge us as we remember and retell. It took about three years to plan and build, but before that there is a wonderful story.

Fourth Presbyterian Church was organized out of a union of two other congregations in 1871, Old North Church and Westminster Presbyterian Church. The new congregation used Old North's building at the corner of Indiana and Cass, closed it for renovation and moved in for its first worship service on October 8, 1871. Shortly after the evening service that day, the great Chicago fire leveled the city and Fourth Presbyterian Church. Of its 800 members all but five families were burned out, including its pastor, David Swing, who lost everything he had, his entire library and 700 sermons. Afterward Swing commented that at least the fire had delivered him from the preacher's ultimate temptation of turning to his barrel of old sermons. A new church building was erected on the corner of Rush and Superior and the congregation occupied it on January 4, 1874. The church thrived and in 1909 called to its pulpit John Timothy Stone. Within three years the congregation made the most remarkable and courageous and farsighted decision in its history. It purchased a piece of land on Pine Street, now Michigan Avenue, before there was a bridge over the river and with the lake shore where the Hancock Building stands. And then they had the vision and courage to hire the pre-eminent Gothic architect in America to design a Presbyterian Church building. Ralph Adams Cram from Boston was also a designer of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan and was the supervising architect for Princeton University. Cram joined with a distinguished Chicago architect, Howard Van Doren Shaw, for the project. Cram designed the Sanctuary - the other buildings are Shaw's... Shaw was so enamored with the project and committed to it that he gave the church the lovely children's fountain in the Garth. The new building was acclaimed immediately. The September 1914 issue of The Architectural Record devoted a major article to Cram's new church, called the church unique, "a living, breathing, spiritual thing... a marvel of grace, beauty, dignity."

One of the wonderful links with the past exists in a very real way today. Mr. and Mrs. Louis Sudler sit in pew number 103, next to the south wall, about a third of the way back. Mr. Sudler's father was a Quaker from Philadelphia, became a Presbyterian when he moved to Chicago, was a close friend of John Timothy Stone, an ardent and generous supporter of the church, and was deeply involved in planning and financing the new building. While it was under construction, Mr. Sudler used to bring his young son, the current Mr. Sudler, on the way home from church over on Rush and Superior, into the partially completed sanctuary and walk around admiring it. During those inspection tours Mr. Sudler decided on the best place to sit to see and hear his friend Dr. Stone... and that is where Mr. Sudler is still sitting on Sunday mornings.

It is a wonderful church building, remarkable in its power and grace and serenity; visited everyday by people who are drawn in, people who sit to think, pray, to enjoy the quiet and who sooner or later look up at the angels, singing Psalm 150, going on overhead perpetually; or the exquisite details from Coats of arms, to Scottish thistles, and carved turtles and lizards on the arms of the chairs.

However, the fact of the matter is that we modern Christians are somewhat ambiguous about grand church buildings. When we travel in Europe we are torn between our admiration for the great old churches and our concern about the fact they they are empty. We find that we cannot help ponder the irony of the burden of their upkeep and maintenance. American concern for the balance sheet and our consequent ambiguity about church buildings, is evidenced, some suggest, by their mediocrity. American churches are obsessed with doing things as inexpensively as possible, and trying to be democratic, are usually governed by committee - that wonderful invention which can be the enemy of creativity... that group someone said produced a camel while intending to design a thoroughbred... So American churches are designed to offend the fewest, which means to meet the least rigorous demands for creativity. And they are full of cast-off furniture, hand-me-down toys for the nursery and paint jobs done by the Bible class on four Tuesday nights and finished by the minister and his wife. Now when it reflects economic necessity, or better yet, a spirit of fellowship - wonderful. But mostly I think it reflects our ambiguity about buildings; we love them and hate ourselves for loving them - what some wag called our "Ediface Complex."

Sam Portaro, Episcopal Chaplain at the University of Chicago, wrote a wonderful article in the Christian Century about a major renovation the Episcopalians have done to their building in Hyde Park and speaks for many of us. "Nurtured in the spiritual cradle of the sixties, I was wary of sinking precious treasure into temporal timbers. How could we justify the energy and expense? Like Judas, I wondered if it would not be better to sell the precious ointment and give the proceeds to the poor." [The Christian Century, 10/7/87]

It is an old, old tension built into our faith tradition. The prophets of Israel were very suspicious of the religion of the Temple. The people traveled lightly during their formative years, carrying their religious equipment with them in a box. It's the religion of the Temple

that finds Jesus threatening and when young Stephen is stoned, it's partly because he criticized Herod's favorite building project, the reconstruction of Solomon's Temple. In order to raise money to complete St. Peter's, the Vatican pushed the sale of indulgences which as much as anything else set off the Protestant Reformation. There is built-in tension about the business of erecting elaborate religious buildings, not to mention the very real dilemma created by huge church buildings no one attends anymore. Who, after all, will pay to maintain them if nobody is using them? An aside: we Protestants should avoid simplistic solutions and express real sympathy for the dilemma our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters are in with those gorgeous, expensive and empty buildings...

There is a willingness today to listen to a wisdom which is slightly older than the 1960s. Jesus, after all, rejected Judas' suggestion that the perfume be sold and the money given to the poor. He allowed the woman to pour the ointment on his feet in a gesture of pure aesthetic generosity and extravagance. Since the first time I saw the Cathedrals of Britain and concluded that the money could be used more faithfully elsewhere, I've changed my mind. There's still not much going on in them - but I'm glad they are there, not simply because of their massive and soaring beauty but also because they remind a world grown suddenly secular and somewhat sad, of another reality. They stand as reminders of the holy, the transcendent, in a civilization which needs that reminder desperately.

Roger Kennedy, Director of the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, has published a gorgeous book, American Churches. In a chapter on cathedrals, he says "Any visitor to New York who stands on Fifth Avenue between Rockefeller Center and 57th Street can see that, in the glassy shadows of the skyscrapers, there lurks an older way of stating reality..." referring to St. Patrick's and St. Thomas. Cathedral builders, says Kennedy, knew things we do not know, namely the correspondence between music and architecture and mathematics: "the mathematical dimensions of many cathedrals were deliberately and painstakingly derived from the same cadences of harmony and order that appear in medieval music and poetry." [p. 79]

The uniqueness of this building is here, I believe. It reflects an earlier way of stating reality. And the simple fact is that we are either incapable of or unwilling to make that investment in religious buildings any longer... which means that to be the church in this building carries with it a very real responsibility.

Friend and neighbor, Bill Granger, who writes for the Chicago Tribune said in a column about the old churches of Chicago and their uncertain future, "if those lovely and sad monuments of faith in another century are not upheld for the price of a roof, what will be upheld a century from now when churches look like fast food stands and mass (worship) has been standardized into television-sized segments."

What will be left? What we are willing to invest in, what we are willing to adorn with symbolism and extravagance are retail stores, cathedrals of commerce, banks, corporate headquarters. Sam Portaro talks about the aesthetic experience of a LaSalle Street bank: lavish solid wood

doors, polished brass, stone slab and real marble floors, barrel vaulted ceilings with real gold leaf four stories overhead. This is not to criticize, in fact, we are enriched by businesses who enable architectural creativity and aesthetic experimentation. It would be a grim world if efficiency was the only objective. But it is to observe that the culture is constructing cathedrals of commerce, not religion, and that, in turn, is to say that this particular building, this gift given to us, is a gift we must keep strong and enhance and maintain and give again to the generations which will follow us.

"The great old churches were really prayers of our ancestors, made into plaster and stone and cement and brick." said Bill Granger. Episcopal Bishop John Shelbey Spong, whose Diocese is Newark, writes about the dilemma of the church in the city. "Money spent to beautify urban houses of worship is not wasted. Urban church structures need to shine as centers of beauty, symbols of hope, signs of the Kingdom. They need to be living parables of God's caring." ["The Urban Church, Symbol & Reality," The Christian Century, 9/12/84]

I'm not sure the Chicago Historic Landmark Commission ever fully understood how deeply this congregation feels about its building - how deeply and how spiritually, and that because it is a spiritual matter for us, there is no question of our ever selling it to anyone or neglecting its upkeep, preservation and maintenance. We will remain here in this unusual and demanding and always challenging outpost of God's kingdom as a sign, a symbol of hope, and gesture of caring and love and generosity.

On the evening of May 12, 1914, James McClure, President of McCormick Theological Seminary delivered the dedicatory address from this pulpit. I was very deeply moved this week to read his words, as eloquent as that era was...

"My soul's desire and prayer to God for this church is that its heart may be like unto the heart of God... that heart that loves every child of earth.

"Oh... that this church may be bigger than any one creed, sect or class or race or color. May be so big that any human being may feel at home here, may draw nigh to God here.

"May it be the mission of this church to tell every man in unmistakable terms how dear he is - preciously dear - to God, and then to live those words in the magnanimity of its welcome, the warmth of its fellowship and the generosity of its devotion."

Dr. Stone responded with appropriate remarks and introduced Thomas Jones, Chairman of the Building Committee, who remarkably anticipated the ambiguity we sometimes feel about our buildings. "Whether this large expenditure which has been made here, whether all the skill and labor that have been expended on these structures shall prove to have been justified, time alone can answer! And the answer when it comes, will be in terms of service, the lives that shall be built here, the spirit that shall go out from here and enter into the life of the community."

Well, Mr. Jones, Dr. Stone, Dr. McClure, here we are, 75 years later, on Pentecost Sunday - as strong as you hoped we might be and engaged in that mission of presence, service, evangelism, and compassion in ways I dare say you wouldn't have imagined. But that, too, is what you hoped for us.

Build the house strong Jesus said... and part of what that means in the 20th Century is build in some flexibility, some give, some ability to move a bit, so that the foundation will not be broken and the structure ruined. What a shock it was for me (and moment of terror) to be making my first pastoral call on the 90th floor of the Hancock Building and to notice that the chandelier was moving. But also, what a valuable lesson. For that building to survive the inevitable storms, it has to move a little bit. And so we have a Long Range Planning Committee engaged in the important exercise of discovering how we can act today so that 75 years from now the sesqui-centennial of the church will be celebrated. That plan will include the restoration of this sanctuary. It will address new concerns and realities such as accessibility and unexpected traffic direction. It will look at our programs, propose new directions for the future and new strategies to get us there. All of which is very much in the best tradition of the church.

Build the house strong Jesus said. I have used his parable of two houses as a way to address the matter of building and maintaining the church. But our Lord told his disciples about the two houses at the end of a sequence of remarkable material, including the Beatitudes, the law of love, the commandment to be merciful. Do these things, he told his people, and your life will be like a house built on rock. Neglect it and it will be like the house that collapsed under the force of the storm because its foundation was inadequate.

We know now the realism of those words. If you have lived long enough to have weathered a few storms you know that being at something more than a casual arm's length basis with God's love and forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ can be a matter of nearly life and death. If you have faced death in any form you know the life-sustaining power of the resurrection. If you have been sick, or in profound pain, or deep fear, you know the redemptive and healing power of the cross of Jesus Christ. And if you have a concern beyond yourself for the well being of the community, the health of the city, the survival of the race, you may be concluding, as I have, that we will only survive if we learn about mutuality, and forgiveness, and bearing one another's burdens and sufferings, and the power of hope. "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ," St. Paul said. And that, I propose to you is the most accurate, commendable and realistic observation anybody ever made.

That doesn't happen in the abstract, by the way. It's the doing that brings the ethic of Jesus to reality, not the thinking about it, the praying about it, the admiring it from a distance. And that means church - the place where people join one another in the great task of loving and serving the world in his name.

So the conclusion is a simple invitation to be part of it: here, if this is where you are, to rededicate yourself to the mission and future vision of this church; or wherever you live and move and have your being. To find the church, to get into it, to love it, agonize with it and give it your time and money and hope and prayers - because it is there, here, and wherever people join one another in the adventure of being the church, that Jesus Christ is remembered, that his love is celebrated, his kingdom comes, and the foundations of life are built strong.

All praise to him.

Amen.